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## Libby's legacy

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Chris Jordan/Daily Inter Lake

THE TOWN of Libby, which has been hard hit by widespread asbestos-related disease, is making an economic comeback. The town's mining history goes back decades, but only in recent years have the health effects been uncovered.

# Mining goes back 85 years

## Timeline starts with 1919 find

**1919:** Edgar Alley begins exploring upper reaches of Rainey Creek near Libby and finds vermiculite

**1924:** Alley builds primitive kiln that produced four tons of Zonolite per day.

March 25, 1995: First house



**July 17, 2000:** Center for Asbestos Related Disease opens in Libby.

**July 21, 2000:** Grace repurchases mine property from Kootenai Development Corp. and refuses EPA access to site.

**July 26, 2000:** Support group forms in Libby to help residents deal with emotional and physical impacts of asbestos exposure.

# mining goes back 85 years

## Timeline starts with 1919 find

**1919:** Edgar Alley begins exploring upper reaches of Rainey Creek near Libby and finds vermiculite.

**1924:** Alley builds primitive kiln that produced four tons of Zonolite per day.

**March 25, 1925:** First boxcar of Zonolite shipped by rail from Libby to Ohio.

**Mid-1926:** Zonolite mill producing up to 100 tons of vermiculite ore a day.

**1939:** Zonolite merges with another mining company to become Universal Zonolite Insulation Co.

**1963:** Zonolite Co. sold to W.R. Grace and Co.

**1967:** Lilas "Shorty" Welch is first W.R. Grace employee from Libby mine to file claim for asbestos disease under Occupational Disease Act.

**April 15, 1986:** Montana Supreme Court hands down decision in Gidley vs. W.R. Grace lawsuit, ruling Libby workers and family members could pursue civil action against Grace.

**1990:** Grace closes the vermiculite mine, citing economic downturn.

**1994:** Grace sells mine property to two Libby area loggers and former vice president of Grace's construction products division.

**Nov. 14, 1999:** The Daily Inter Lake publishes "Fall from Grace," an in-depth look at lingering asbestos problems in Libby.

**Nov. 18, 1999:** Seattle Post-Intelligencer publishes "Uncivil Action: A Town Left to Die," chronicling Libby asbestos situation.

**Nov. 21, 1999:** State and federal agencies decide to investigate whether asbestos still threatens Libby residents.

**Nov. 30, 1999:** First community meeting on asbestos, attended by 550 people.

**Dec. 10, 1999:** Environmental Protection Agency opens office in Libby; asbestos testing of area homes and businesses begins.

**Dec. 13, 1999:** W.R. Grace & Co. opens office in Libby.

**Dec. 16, 1999:** AI public



Photo courtesy Lincoln County District Court

THIS IS AN aerial view of the W.R. Grace & Co. vermiculite mine when it was in production. The mine closed in 1990.

meeting, state medical officer says 300 people from Libby area have been diagnosed with asbestos-related lung disease.

**Dec. 24, 1999:** EPA completes first round of asbestos testing.

**Jan. 13, 2000:** Libby health officials unveil \$6.8 million plan for asbestos screening and ongoing health care during meeting with U.S. Sen. Conrad Burns, R-Mont. Hospital CEO Rick Palagi estimates 4,000 people will want to be screened.

**Jan. 14, 2000:** EPA expands investigation of asbestos-related death to include sites across the nation that received ore from Libby mine.

**Jan. 17, 2000:** U.S. Sen. Max Baucus, D-Mont., meets with Libby asbestos victims.

**Jan. 17, 2000:** Team of investigators from Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry begins assessing ongoing health risks from asbestos.

**Jan. 20, 2000:** EPA holds meeting to form community advisory group for asbestos issues.

**Jan. 20, 2000:** W.R. Grace says it will donate \$250,000 for asbestos screenings and offer medical coverage to people diagnosed with asbestos-related illness.

**Jan. 31, 2000:** EPA testing shows asbestos trouble spots at the former expansion plant area used by the mine and former rail-

road loading facility, plus two homes.

**Feb. 2, 2000:** EPA holds town meeting to explain preliminary test results.

**Feb. 11, 2000:** Class-action lawsuit filed against W.R. Grace, in addition to 140 personal-injury lawsuits still pending.

**Feb. 15, 2000:** U.S. Senate Environment and Public Works Committee holds field hearing in Libby on asbestos situation.

**March 10, 2000:** EPA begins second round of testing on 35 homes.

**March 20, 2000:** EPA announces two additional homes have air problems.

**March 23, 2000:** Federal investigators say that, except for some former W.R. Grace sites, there appears to be little current risk in Libby today.

**April 18, 2000:** W.R. Grace rejects Environmental Protection Agency plan to clean asbestos contamination from two former mine sites.

**May 31, 2000:** At community meeting, Libby residents and officials evaluate environmental cleanup plans and a screening program to detect asbestos-related disease.

**June 26, 2000:** \$12 million federal aid package for health care and economic development approved.

**June 28, 2000:** Free medical testing begins to find evidence of exposure to asbestos.

**July 17, 2000:** Center for Asbestos Related Disease opens in Libby.

**July 21, 2000:** Grace repurchases mine property from Kootenai Development Corp. and refuses EPA access to site.

**July 26, 2000:** Support group forms in Libby to help residents deal with emotional and physical impacts of asbestos exposure.

**Aug. 7, 2000:** Libby City Council Monday appoints committee to oversee \$8.5 million federal appropriation for economic development.

**Sept. 8, 2000:** Grace allows EPA partial access to mine site, but still won't allow agency to haul contaminated soil to the mine.

**Sept. 21, 2000:** Three-day conference on asbestos and public health issues begins in Libby.

**Nov. 1, 2000:** Preliminary results show 9-10 percent of people in screening program have been referred for more evaluation.

**Nov. 2, 2000:** Screening ends; 6,800 people tested.

**April 2001:** EPA paves entrance road to vermiculite mine in preparation for hauling toxic soil back to mine.

**April 2001:** Grace files for Chapter 11 bankruptcy.

**May 2001:** Libby Asbestos Memorial Project organizes; 130 white crosses posted in memory of asbestos victims.

**August 2001:** Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry reports one in five people tested in Libby showed lung abnormalities.

**September 2001:** EPA Administrator Christine Todd Whitman visits Libby, tells residents "you are the center of attention in the nation's eye."

**December 2001:** Gov. Judy Martz announces intention to use "Silver Bullet" Superfund designation to put Libby cleanup on fast track.

**August 2004:** U.S. District Judge Donald Molloy of Missoula orders W.R. Grace to repay the government \$54.5 million for cleanup efforts in asbestos-tainted areas of Libby.

**Oct. 29, 2004:** W.R. Grace becomes target of federal grand jury investigation relating to possible violations of environmental laws in Montana.